

# Negotiating Semiotics of *Mise en Scene* is the Real Challenge of Indian Cinema: A De-Westernizing Approach to Visual Culture

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Indian cinema<sup>1</sup> (see the definition of Murthy et al., 2015) is the least understood visual culture<sup>2</sup> both in the West and in the East. There are several reasons for such a lopsided approach to Indian cinema. The lack of knowledge of the Indian semiotics and phenomenology, associated with its age old culture and traditions, to negotiate filmic frames is the first and foremost reason among others. Another reason that heightens this grave lapse is the treating of the Indian cinema with the Western theories such as psychoanalysis and Marxism (Murthy et al., 2015). In fact, the Indian cinema is as old as World cinema and its silent and talkie eras ran parallel to the developments in the West (see Murthy, 2012; Murthy et al., 2015). Despite India being a colonial nation during the silent and talkie eras, its business tycoons in Bombay, Chennai and Calcutta have always attempted to grab the latest technology and infrastructure from the West. Yet, there were no attempts to study the Indian cinema, as pointed out by Murthy et al (2015) and Murthy (2016), from its native cultural and foundational perspectives during the colonial and the post colonial rule (Murthy et al., 2015).

The early attempts of some of the Western and the West educated Indian scholars appeared to have established a kind of discursive relationships between politics and cinema, especially from the stand point of view of the

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- 1 Murthy et al. (2015) defined that both Hindi and Telugu cinema together constitute the Indian cinema. Based on the share of these two industries in the film industries' investment pie chart, they arrived at this concept. Murthy (2018) further showed how Tollywood (Telugu film industry) is a better candidate to be a 'soft power' than 'Bollywood' (Hindi cinema) as the former represented pan-Indian culture and tradition than the latter.
  - 2 Visual culture: This article defines visual culture as a cumulative representation of inner and outer feelings, besides sentiments and traditions, of the Indians in the form of a visual or a series of visuals. For instance the dance traditions such as *Bharatanatyam* and its regional variants such as *Kuchipudi* (Telugu), *Kathak* (Punjab), *Odissi* (Odisha), *Kathakali* (Kerala), etc have their representation as dance postures on the temple walls and the temples' huge doors.

Southern Indian politics (Jr.Robert Hardgrave, 1979; Pandian, 1990; Madhava Prasad, 1998; Vasudevan, 2008, 2010). Film scholars like Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen (1994, 1995) have expanded these studies by tending to interpret Hindi cinema as 'Bollywood' which, according to them, can also be considered a synonym of Indian cinema as well as a signifier of a 'portable entertainment culture'. Their studies have thus become biblical for next two decades of academia both in the West and in the East. The scholars who supported Rajadhyaksha's concept of 'Bollywood' were thus termed as 'Bollywoodized academia'<sup>3</sup> (see Murthy et al., 2015).

However Western film scholars like Stam (2000) opined that 'The issue of realism also had to do with intercultural dialogue. In the case of European modernism, as Bhaktin and Medvedev (1985) suggest in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, non-European cultures became the catalysts for the supersession, within Europe, of a retrograde culture bound version. Africa, Asia and the America provided a reservoir of alternative trans-realist forms and attitudes. In his film-theory, Sergei Eisenstein invoked extra-European traditions (Hindi *rasa*, Japanese kabuki) as part of his attempt to construct a film aesthetic which went beyond mere mimesis....Vast regions of the world, and long periods of artistic history had shown little allegiance to or even interest in realism' (Stam, 2000, p. 16-17).

Robert Stam (2000, p. 16) pointed out that there is a two thousand years old tradition of classical Sanskrit drama replete with '*Rasas*'(quintessence of emotions) which impacted on the Indian cinema. *Rasa* and *Bhava* (subtle and explicit inner and outer sentiments and meanings of the Indians) also flowed from the Indian dance tradition (*Natya Sastra*). Robert Stam (2000, p. 16) looked at the Indian cinema as a 'Third World' cinema, expressed his view that '....Non-realist traditions also exist within the West, of course, and in any case there is nothing intrinsically "bad" about occidental realism. But as the product of a specific culture and historical moment, it is just one of many possible aesthetics'.

Barnouw and Krishnaswamy (1980) had stated that mythology, music, songs and dances are always part of the everyday life of the Indians and are part of the repertory of theatre in various regions. 'They provided the needed catalyst to the very diverse audiences speaking in different languages', observed the authors. Almost every Indian film, with the exception of art films of Ray and his cult, offers three to four songs in the least to the audi-

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3 Bollywoodized academia: Scholars who supported the definition of Rajadhyaksha's definition of Bollywood. Readers may also note the shift in the definition of Bollywood that Rajadhyaksha offered in the post 2014, nearly after a decade.

ences. In other words, these art forms became central to the Indian cinema tradition (Thoraval, 2000, p. 55-57).

The studies of Bollywoodized academia have failed to establish the 'Rasa' and 'Bhava' in the Indian films as the above stated scholars have never treated the Indian cinema from its twin significant tropes drawn from its ancient culture and traditions— semiotics and phenomenology. (Murthy et al., 2015; Murthy, 2016). On the contrary they subjected the 'tradition' in the Indian classical cinema to the Marxist analysis which resulted in interpreting both the 'tradition' and 'subjectivity' as the products of colonial rule. Such an approach has opened up flood gates to the post-colonial and post-structuralist scholars who forayed in a big way into classical Indian cinema distorting the import of classical texts like *Devdas* also (see Murthy & Meitei, 2016).

As this trend went against the grain of the Indian traditional and classical cinema, the last decade has seen several scholars questioning the research done until now. The relevance of theoretical bases and the consequent findings arrived at by the above cited Bollywoodized academia were also seriously contested (Murthy et al., 2015; Murthy & Meitei, 2016; Murthy, 2016; Sarkar, 2008).

Among the scholars, who contested the authority of the Bollywoodized academia and their propositions on Indian cinema, Murthy (2012, 2014; Murthy et al., 2015; Murthy & Meitei, 2016) and Sarkar (2008) are prominent. While these scholars through their independent research dismissed the term 'Bollywood' as a signifier of 'portable cultural industry' and as a representative of Indian cinema, Murthy (2012) has clearly offered the Indian cinema as a model for de-Westernizing media studies. He also suggested that both Hindi and Telugu cinema together be described as Indian cinema while other regional cinemas, with the exception of Tamil cinema, remained at periphery both in terms of production and marketing across the globe (Murthy et al., 2015). By expanding his studies further Murthy and Meitei (2016) have shown how the semiotics and phenomenology of each of the Indian cinemas are distinct and unique citing examples from Telugu cinema in comparison with the Hindi cinema (Murthy & Meitei, 2016; Murthy, 2016).

Murthy et al. (2015) have further demonstrated how the semiotics and phenomenology involved in Indian life have been deftly developed into camera angles and shots by its innovative directors successively. Murthy and his co-researchers (Murthy, 2014; Murthy et al., 2015; Murthy & Meitei, 2016) have shown how innovations in *mise-en-scene* have negotiated different contextual meanings for the Indian audiences from the perspectives of Indian spirituality and aesthetics that subsume performatory arts while

the latter are very much part of the life of an every average Indian. These angles and camera movements are typically different from the camera movements and angles used in the West for expression of similar ideas (Deleuze, 1983, 1985).

The semiotics in Telugu and Hindi cinemas are not isolated metaphors; they are part of the larger facets of phenomenology with which the Indian culture is entangled (see Murthy, 2015, 2016). They are not just cut-away shots for change of a sequence either. They are part of the diegetic content of the film. They offer an added meaning to the existing understanding of a scene/character in a given context of the film. On a similar line this chapter argues that colors, costumes, lightings, settings, etc. are culture specific in the Indian context. In Indian cinema they are borrowed from the typical descriptions in the Indian epics, religious texts and literary texts.

The chapter, grounded in qualitative and analytical methods, adopts Murthy's (2012) meta theoretical model—Indian cinema as a model for de-Westernizing media studies. Firstly, it overviews how the studies of Bollywoodized academia have fallen apart largely due to their reliance on the Western social and film theories. Further it expounds how all those semiotics and phenomenological facets associated with the Indian culture and tradition help establish the real '*Rasa*' and '*Bhava*' expected of flowing from the Indian cinema. Thus, the chapter argues that 'de-Westernizing the Indian film studies' is the only available and sustainable alternative to establish the quintessence (*Rasa*) of the Indian cinema. Until such an attempt is made on a larger scale, it is not proper to arrive at a conclusion that the Indian cinema is thus far best understood based on the Western social and film theories. The present chapter is an endeavor in continuation to the earlier efforts of Murthy (Murthy, 2012; Murthy, 2014; Murthy, et al., 2015; Murthy & Meitei, 2016; Murthy, 2016).

## 1. *Prominent Lapses of the Western Theories in Interpreting Indian Cinema*

### 1.1. *Pricking the Nation-Statehood of India*

One of the major threats, which arose from the Western theories and their interpretations of the Indian cinema, is to deny Indian cinema the status of a 'national cinema' within its territorial framework and age old cultural traditions. Invoking the Marxist critiques of Seamus Deane and Aijaz Ahmad, who argued that 'an art work or an art form cannot be interpreted within the frame work of a territory', Paul Willemsen (1994), in his introduction to '*Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*' argues that he along with Rajad-

hyaksha have considered “‘India’ not as a fixed entity but as a socio-cultural process, a changing and contested set of overlapping frameworks (always temporarily), stabilized by governmental institutions, be they the Colonial administration, the Indian government or the various institutions seeking to regulate (or deregulate, which is only a different type of regulation) the interface between culture and economy within, at any given time, specific territorial limits” (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, 1994, p. 9 in Preface).

The basic premise of this argument is that any effort to interpret Indian cinema from any other trope, especially that involves tradition and culture, which encompasses a larger part of the semiology and phenomenology, will allow in a big way the creeping in of ‘essentialism’ that the Marxist scholarship or post-critical theorists do not welcome. To substantiate this argument the authors take cue from the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993, p. 5) who described the ‘risk of essence’ in terms of the need to acknowledge ‘the dangerousness of something one cannot use’.

Surprisingly, the contemporary ilk of Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1994), have ignored this argument. Neither did they extend or apply this to their work. Madhava Prasad<sup>4</sup>, a noted scholar of Indian films studies from the perspectives of the Western theories, has comfortably bypassed the argument by taking a position that ‘India, a political unit constituted by the combined imaginations of colonial rulers and nationalists, was sometimes seen as representing a broad civilizational unity among a number of national identities. On the other hand, he argues, given the compulsions of the colonial form of the state that was inherited by the nationalists, India itself had to be conceived as a nation, to fall in line with the new global order of nation-states’ (Prasad, 2010, p. 3). He further argued that ‘the idea that India is a nation rather than a federation seems to have acquired the status of inviolable truth in the course of the last sixty years of its existence as a Republic’ (Prasad, 2010, p. 3).

Murthy et al. (2015) not only refuted these arguments of Seamus Deane, Aijaz Ahmad, Paul Willemen, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, etc as products of ‘Orientalist’ thought, as adduced by Edward Said (1979) in his famous work—*Orientalism*—but also suggested that be it an art form or literary form, nothing can exist or hang in a vacuum. The rock bottom of any art form is a civilization which perpetuates incessantly despite a minor

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4 Madhava Prasad has positioned his doctoral work, published as— *Ideology of the Hindi Film*—between reputed Marxist theoretical enunciations of *The German Ideology* (Marx, 1987) and Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and Frederic Jameson’s controversial assertion that Third World texts are necessarily ‘allegorical’ (Jameson, 1987, p. 141).

or major change in the boundaries of a nation. That India was and is perpetually a civilization with a shared culture that subsumed Sanskritization of all languages coupled with devotion and worship of common gods in all regions. Such an India as a 'nation' has nothing to do with the 'contractions' that India was subjected to during colonial and post-colonial rule. The cross-culturalism is inherent in Indian civilization giving space for cultural differences in food, dress and living styles that depended upon climatic and environmental conditions. Evidence for sustained cross-culturalism stems from the art forms that are essentially variants of one major art form like *Bharatanatyam*. For instance, *Bharatanatyam* (a classical national dance form enunciated by Bharatmuni in pre-historic times) has manifested in various regional formats across India. *Kathak* (Punjab), *Kathakkali* (Kerala), *Odissi* (Odisha), *Kuchipudi* (Andhra Pradesh), *Perini* (Telangana), etc. are the variants of *Bharatanatyam*.

## 1.2. *Aspersions on the Rasa Theory in Indian National Cinema*

Two important authors, Ashish Nandy (1995) and Chidanand Das Gupta (1992), both educated in the West, have theorized that the Indian popular cinema lacks in modern individual. Though Das Gupta has argued that popular cinema flourished at the expense of non-individuated subjectivity which he considered as a 'submission' to the authority, Nandy on the other hand described such subjectivity as 'traditional' social mores against atomizing modernity. Nandy's argument positions that 'subjectivity' pointed out by Das Gupta is nothing but a "political dynamic of popular film that lies in its symbolic enactment of 'traditional' society's self-exclusion from the domain of an instrumentalist rationality". Such perceptions led Vasudevan (2013, p. 9) to argue that 'at first glance, the cinema indeed seems to reproduce the traditional, its entertainments being organized along different registers, edificatory and pleasurable, on the lines of '*Rasa*' theory'. He asserts that 'this is often accompanied by an incoherent character development, as if the objective of the entertainment is the display of a (structured) variety of attributes rather than outlining of a plausible personality'. One can clearly see a moderation of arguments advanced by both Nandy (1995) and Das Gupta (1992) in Vasudevan's contentions (2013, p. 9).

However, Vasudevan's view on the alleged 'incoherent' character development, attributed to the Indian cinema by the scholars trained in the West, is a western construct irrationally imposed on the Indian cinema. It is 'irrational' because these scholars never attempted to interpret the Indian cinema from its native and modernist or foundationist perspectives or

models (Murthy et al., 2015). The author again asserts that such misinterpretations stemmed from an abject ignorance of the Indian classical systems and traditions that flowed from its age long cultures. In addition to the above arguments against the Indian popular films or commercial cinema, which is unwaveringly in line with *Rasa* and *Bhava*, are based on the apparent lack of knowledge of semiology and phenomenology of Indian culture and tradition. On the other hand, Vasudevan interprets that the 'looks' of 'tradition' and 'subjectivity' are the outcomes of 'submission' to authority and hegemony (Vasudevan, 2000, p. 26-27). It is the latter observation that testifies to the author's contention that early film scholars from India has unnecessarily been anxious to prove to the West that Indian cinema is an object of study within the meaning of 'Orientalism' conceding to the Western superiority of its being a 'subject'.

### 1.3. Dubious Moniker 'Bollywood' as Indian Popular Cinema

The very term 'Bollywood' as a representative of Indian cinema has evoked nausea among a number of Indian scholars of film studies. Sarkar (2008, p. 35) has offered a very comprehensive quote to summarize here: 'From kitschy invocation to the more weighty and careful ruminations, such engagements have been frequently complicit in the reduction of all of Indian cinema to Bollywood: the myopia that reduced "Indian Cinema" to the oeuvre of Satyajit Ray in an earlier period continues in a different guise.'

Such an outburst is not without any reason. It was Rajadhyaksha, who was first to interpret the Indian cinema as Bollywood<sup>5</sup>. For, he considered Hindi cinema of post-1990s as a representative of the Indian cinema. According to him 1990 marked the heralding of globalization in India. Though he has studied the Indian cinemas, especially Hindi and Marathi cinema, prior to 1990s, he subjected his interpretations to the lexicon of post-critical theories and Marxism (see Rajadhyaksha—The 'Bollywoodization' of Indian Cinema, 2013). In the process he aligned himself to the

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5 The term 'Bollywood' is a portmanteau of two words: 'Bolly' for Bombay and 'wood' from Hollywood. Its origin could be traced to an article published in 1932 in an American Cinematographer by Wilford E. Deming who referring to the location of two film studios located in Tollygunge, a place of business, in then Calcutta (now spelled as Kolkata), tended to describe it as Tollywood wherein 'Tolly' rhyming with Holly and joined with wood to indicate it as a place of studios. Tollywood refers to Bengali cinema. However, today Telugu cinema industry is most popularly referred to as Tollywood.

views of Orientalists who considered 'Asia' as an object of study for the West and Europe, and the Indian cinema too as an object of study without an exception (Magnan-Park et al., 2018, p. 2). In order to fulfill the gap that Western film theorists may pin-point as an inadequacy in Indian cinema, Rajadhyaksha has strained himself beyond one's imagination to prove to the West that in every aspect the Indian cinema is a fit case for interpretation from the Western theoretical perspectives besides post-modern and post-critical thoughts (see Rajadhyaksha's article –Viewership and Democracy in Cinema, 2013).

While Rajadhyaksha first proposed the term 'Bollywood' to mean Hindi cinema as a representative of Indian cinema in 2003, he revised his connotation of this moniker 'Bollywood' to mean 'entire entertainment industry' instead of Hindi cinema. In other words, as Madhava Prasad put it, 'Bollywood' in its revised connotation stands as an 'empty signifier' without referring to any particular language or regional industry. However, the film scholars across the globe have not taken it lightly. As mentioned already in the foregoing, the term evoked serious reactions among several other non-Bollywoodized academics. Gehlawat writes that 'the question of what the Bollywood' moniker implies has also become a subject of debate (Gehlawat, 2010, p. xii). He too discussed the various connotations offered to the term Bollywood but leaves it unsettled with the statement that he would accept Bollywood as a nationally dominant cinema, signifying popular Hindi cinema, but not representing the Indian national cinema.

Dwyer (2011) noted that the definition of the term Bollywood is still unsettling with the contradictions stemming from within India amongst most popular post modern, post critical and post colonial writers such as Rajadhyaksha (2003) and Vasudevan (2011). Vasudevan (2011) suggested the restriction of the term to the commodity function of high-profile, export-oriented Bombay film, which, according to him, is branding India rather than representing it as an aesthetic form. He was in consonance with Dwyer (2011, p. 24) that no definitive meaning can possibly be ascribed to Bollywood at this time. In effect, he states: A marked absence in these attempts to diagnose Bollywood, whether by Rajadhyaksha or by the British and US based critics, is any substantial reference to the form, storytelling practices, actorly and star economies and even on screen performance cultures.



#### 1.4. Fragility of 'Darsanic' Theory in Indian Cinema

Madhava Prasad in his anxiety to interpret Hindi cinema as a site of ideological production has touched a few important laterals of film making of which 'absolutist gaze' is one. He has chosen this to explain as he has found two important Western works, Diana Eck (1981) and Lawrence Babb (1981) who had studied one time in their life about an Indian spiritual phenomenon that transpires between a visiting devotee and the presiding deity in a temple. Without going into the spiritual and metaphysical aspects of the Indian *Darshan Siddhanta*, as promulgated by different heads of *Darshana* schools such as *Advaita*, *Dvaita* and *Visishta Advaita*, Lawrence Babb (1981) has published his paper with his own unsubstantiated premises on 'darsan' in a temple. The first two paragraphs in his paper published in *Journal of Anthropological Research* is enough to show how Western authors were eager to publish a paper without an in depth study of the phenomenon by consulting the appropriate texts, first and then, interviewing the scholars who could interpret the phenomenon of 'darsan'.

Based on such ill-founded and misinterpreted version, Madhava Prasad interpreted the 'darsan' in Indian cinema as a feudalist process and the relationship that a devotee seeks between himself/herself and the deity was equated with the 'darsan' accorded to a subject of a feudal state in India in the pre and post colonial India (1998, p. 75-77). He assumes that the same was replicated in Indian cinema. Obviously he has not read *The Gita*, the biblical text also considered as a compendium of all Upanishads, which interprets –what devotion meant for a devotee in relation to the deity. By extending the concepts of 'voyeurism' and 'scopophilia' of the Western theory to the gaze of a devotee/a subject of a feudal state, Madhava Prasad (1998) tried to bring two seemingly irreconcilable spheres of cinema (spiritual and material) to a knot. Even without checking whether such a study could stand as an analogy, he brazenly proceeded to compare female/male gaze in Indian cinema/public life with 'darsan' in all aspects of mundane life that an Indian film tries to capture. The fact that Ravi Vasudevan has also approved of such 'gaze' as 'darsan' as enunciated by Babb has added strength to Madhava Prasad (as one can understand from a footnote; 1998, p. 75).

Philip Lutgendorf (2006) has taken an exception to the study of 'darsan' by Madhava Prasad. Without mincing words, he has not only critiqued the misinterpretation of Prasad but also offered his own alternative version to it. Lutgendorf argues that 'M. Madhava Prasad's contention for the decades-long dominance of a single ideological master narrative hinges on a few roughly-sketched plot outlines, omits questions of reception, and ignores

the films' poetic and musical component altogether' (Prasad, 1998, p. 64-72). He argues further that Prasad's stress on merely "symbolic identification" suggests his assumption that Western notions of absolute transcendence, of God as the "wholly other" to the human, apply to Hindu deities. But anyone who takes the trouble to read a *purana* or a devotional chapbook, or to watch a "mythological" film, ought to feel uneasy with this assumption (2006, p. 8). Lutgendorf further argues that this a fundamentally flawed proposition as the Hindus worship animals like Snake, Cow, Elephant, Tiger/Lion, Monkey, Lizard, Mouse and trees like Morgosa and Banyan, and plants like Osmium too? See the images in Figure 1 where one finds Nivedita in Bengali film BhaginiNivedita (1961) and Shankara's mother, Aryamba in film AdiShankaracharya (1983) offers prayers to the sacred Tulsi. Sometimes, they worship the living animals stated above. Will Prasad's explanation stand to testify to these forms of worship?

Above all, questions abound as to what '*darsan*' implies in case of visiting Christians to churches or Muslims to Mecca. Their religions do not speak anything about what transpires between a visiting devotee and the iconic Jesus's crucifixion or a tomb of Prophet of Mohammad. Yet, the visitors to these holy places do some recitations or enchant some words before these icons. Are they of the view that there is no gaze in the reverse from the icons and it is a blind alley? Invoking the Indian aesthetics and semiotics of spirituality, Murthy and Meitei (2016, p. 24-40) not only refuted the concepts of Madhava Prasad's '*darsan*' but also other western post-critical theories in their article on remakes of *Devadas* published in *South Asian Research*. From the foregoing it is clear how fragile and facile is the concept of '*darsan*' emanating from the work of Madhava Prasad (1998).

Due to limitations of space, the author is not willing to go deep into the other film theories of Madhava Prasad (2014, p. 17) wherein he tried to draw discursive relationships between the Indian cinema and the Southern Indian Politics in his work—*Cine Politics*. Especially his interpretations of 'Stardom Plus' of MGR and NTR, besides Jaya Lalitha, (former Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu and Telugu States), did not sustain for long. The 'Stardom Plus' flopped in respect of heroes like Chiranjeevi, Rajani Kant and Kamal Hasan, hailing from the same States of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh as they could not succeed in politics to the extent the MGR, NTR and Jaya Lalita trio had. Of course, Madhava Prasad himself admitted the limitations of his study.

## 2. Methodology

Grounded in cultural theory—Semiology and Phenomenology—the study is essentially qualitative and analytical based on hermeneutics and film clippings. The study uses the broad theoretical frame work that Edward Said (1979) has laid down in his famous work—*Orientalism*. The study identified how the commonly used lexicon in the Indian life, found in the indigenous film appreciations and reviews, has been appropriated by the Western critics to relate the Indian film studies to Marxism as well as Post-critical theories. The most prevalent lexicon the study documented in the works of Marxist and post-critical interpretations are: tradition, devotion, loyalty, Signs of Gods, codes and identities, characterization and development of characters, romance, land lords, feudal courts and his subjects, subjectivity, objectivity, production and distribution of films, frontality, camera movements and camera looks, etc.

Against the background, the study offers the ‘de-Westernizing media studies’ as an alternative paradigm to interpret the visual cultures of Indian cinema. The Semiology and Phenomenology in the present study is based on Murthy’s earlier work in which he classified what Phenomenology in the Indian context is deemed to be (Murthy, 2012, p. 209-210; see Table 2-Materialistic System). Towards this the study invokes the Indian Semiotic theory which substitutes or even replaces the Pierce’s Semiotic theory. Film clippings have been selectively cut as moving images to show how Semiology and Phenomenology offer a totally different and comprehensive interpretation that is consistent with India’s long standing culture and traditions (see Figs.1-4). A few Telugu films which have won the national awards under various categories since 1954 have been taken as case studies for the study (Fig.5). Similarly about 253 films comprising a wide spectrum of regional languages that have won national awards since 1954 were also analyzed for their cultural richness that captivated the Indian audiences for over 64 years.

## 3. Negotiating Semiotics of Mise en Scene in Indian Cinema

Indian life is full of splendor. Be it any region of India, a number of festivals stemming from national and regional culture greet the citizens throughout the year. Each festival is celebrated with a sense of fervor and gaiety. A number of festivals in India, irrespective of regional differences, are associated with nature that subsumes worshipping of nature in its original and pure form. E.g. Rice harvesting festival termed as ‘*MakaraSan-*

*skranti*’ in the States of Andhra and Telangana (Telugu speaking States), ‘*Baisakhi*’ (Punjab & Haryana), ‘*Ladakh*’ (Ladakh region of Kashmir), ‘*Lohri*’ & ‘*Basant Panchami*’ (Punjab and Haryana), ‘*Bihu*’ (Assam and North East), ‘*Naukhai*’ (Odisha), ‘*GudiPadva*’ (Maharashtra), ‘*Onam*’ (Kerala) etc. Here, nature is used in a broader sense that subsumes animals, trees, plants, flowers, garlands, feminism and sexualities, etc.

This apart, lights, costumes, colors of items used in rituals, colors of dresses worn, nature of cotton or silk used in the dresses will have their own semiotic significance based on their relevance to the phenomenon of the festival or depending on the description and prescription of rituals observed. The visuals furnished in Figure 3 will show how song and dance sequences in Indian cinema will specify dress codes for singing and dances during occasions like marriages and other domestic functions.

Indian life has several important facets that are distinctly different from the Western societies. Majority of Indians not only believe in God but also believe that God is manifest in all and everywhere including humans. Starting with *Upanayanams* (Thread Ceremonies), Girl’s Puberty/age of maturity functions, marriages and child’s cradle ceremony, house warming ceremony (Entering a newly constructed house), *Bhoomi Pooja* (worshipping the land before constructing a house/complex on the site), and every step of the Indian life is associated with an array of rituals that are part of India’s wider culture. With subtle differences, almost all the facets of Indian life cited here are common across all regions in India.

The visuals in Figure 3 deal with how prayers are offered to the Lord Sun at seas/rivers. They would also show how the rituals for deceased elders are performed at sea shore by the legal heirs in memory of their late fathers/forefathers, etc. Even the ashes of the cremated kith and kin are merged in rivers/seas on certain occasions like full moon, new moon, etc. For instance food is served to guests and saints or monks in plantain leaves in the South Indian traditions (see Fig.2). On the other hand, medicinal leaves from certain plants are used for treatment of patients in various forms as one can note in Figure 4.

The present study is aware of the popular Western critic that ‘Anthropologists, Indologists or others employing the tools of these disciplines showed a tendency to read the Indian popular cinema as evidence of unbroken continuity of Indian culture and its tenacity in the face of the assault of modernity’ (Prasad, 1998, p. 15). Prasad warns such ‘eternalist proclamations ....while claiming the truth about Indian cinema actually contributed to the actual maintenance of an Indological myth; the myth of mythically minded Indian (1998, p. 17). While referring to Kazmi’s (1999, p. 62) ‘fetishization of tradition’ or Saari’s (1985, p. 16) description of an

Indian as an 'inescapable villager' as a rustic 'Psyche', Lutgendorf strongly argues that 'Madhava Prasad's Marxist reduction of Indian cinema is scarcely satisfying and ignoring the film's reception and its poetic and musical components' (2006, p. 4).

In the Indian life, family and human relations, school/college and teenage relations, students and teachers relations, boys and girls relations, temples role as a site for human expression of joy, grief and for celebration of functions like weddings, sacred rivers and seas as sites for sanctification, festivals, love and affections, partitions/separations of joint families and divorces, illnesses and deaths constitute emotional tangents. Along these tangents, human expressions abound in various forms some of which are semiotic while others are phenomenological. By default almost all sites cited above are associated with music and dance punctuated with regional differences. Pluralism is built-in all aspects. No place for 'essentialism' as Marxist critics tend to show this often as a threat to Indian society due to its ability to perpetuate 'mythical extravaganza'. For that matter cultural theorist, Smith (2001) argues that every school of thought or an ideology is traditionalist or foundationist that promoted 'essentialism' and 'oppressive hierarchies'. Marxist school of thought is no exception to this. Given this how can a Marxist or post-critical critique of Indian cinema offer a better interpretation than cultural approach through Indian semiology and phenomenology?

In keeping with the pluralism of the Indian traditions, within the region of each State, there are different perceptions in performing various rituals connected with births (*Jananms*) marriages or *Upanayanams* or '*AntyaKriyas*' (death ceremonies). Depending on the faith in the family deity these observations change. *Saivas* (those who worship Lord Shiva), *Madhvas* and *Vaishnavaites* (those who worship Lord Vishnu), *Smarthas* (those who worship Lord Siva and Vishnu), *Advaitins* (those who believe that God is infinite and formless), etc celebrate the same rituals in various ways. The divergence and plurality thus preclude essentialism, oppression and hierarchies.

Unfortunately, the Western scholars trained in the Marxist or post-critical thought are not only agnostics and atheistic but also disbelievers in the immense human potential embedded in each celebration stated in the preceding paragraph. Hence, their studies selectively focus on areas of labor, feudalism, capitalism, economic and sexual relations between man and woman, mother and son, father and son or father and daughter, disputes of property, rights of a deprived group, ethics of sexual relationships, etc where there is enough scope for promoting a conflict or driving a conflict among people in an irreversible manner. They advocated the Western

thought of capturing 'real' or 'reality' of life separating melodrama from reality (Vasudevan, 2013). Due to this very logic, these scholars considered the Indian cinema worthy of Western theoretical interpretation since 1956, the year the very first realistic cinema namely *Pather Panchali*, directed by Satyajit Ray, was out (Prasad, 1998; Vasudevan, 2013).

Thus the works of Marxist and post-critical scholars cited in the foregoing have never dealt with the wider spectrum of culture that entangled the Indian life as detailed earlier. In the absence of a holistic approach to the Indian life and its broader spectrum, the works done by the above cited Marxist or post critical film scholars remained more or less insignificant and inconsequential to Indian cinema.

Concerning the importance of 'de-Westernizing media research', Wang (2011) writes: In film and area studies, and to a large extent, in cultural studies, indigenization is considered a concern that, after some twenty years of debate on cross-cultural reading, has been worked through (2011, p. 5).

An analysis of films observed for the study offered an array of categories: a. Films having Religious and Philosophical theme, b. Films having Humanistic themes, c. Films having Humanistic and Biographical theme, d. Films having Feminist theme, e. Films having Marxist theme, and f. Films having Romantic theme. All the above categories have arisen from the interface of various social institutions such as family, temple, educational institutions, and socio, economic and political conditions of societal life and the consequent interactions arising thus keep multiplying in different formats.

These films have offered immense evidence with an array of scenes that subsumed not only phenomenological and semiotic shots but also offered innovations in the Indian film making (see Figs. 1-4). For instance in Figure 2, the author has grouped a few frames of films from across different languages showing a commonality of singing to an accompaniment of simple musical instruments. These are considered as simple philosophical songs, also known as '*Tatvas*', and veer round the human life that is deigitic and essential in the narrative. One would also see the frames from films in the same Figure 2 where characters sing while travelling. Again the songs were part of the deigitic content of the narrative. Hence there is a theorization that songs in the Indian cinema are extended narratives, which is an innovation in the repertoire of cinema and in the projection of complex behavior of humans. Without these visuals the Indian cinema cannot be imagined; nor do people appreciate it.

Another innovation in Indian film production technique is its efficient use of visuals of 'silhouettes' for expression of various feelings as an aesthet-

ic form. For instance, the concept of 'silhouettes' both in black and white era, and later in the color film era is wide spread among the Indian film traditions both in Hindi and Telugu. Though much of its sheen is lost in Hindi films, the South Indian film industry, especially Telugu, besides Tamil and Malayalam to some extent, still continues to use 'silhouettes' as an aesthetic form to convey various shots such as grief, pleasure, solitariness, gloom, etc. These are shots of semiotics basically and to be understood culturally and traditionally. 'Silhouettes' are also used to enhance or build up emotion (*rasa* & *bhava*) among audiences. They are used as an aesthetic spectacle in Telugu film songs without an exception though Hindi films songs today do not follow this pattern any longer. Even the visual reading of the basic camera shots such as high angle and low angle besides cut away shots is not same as that of Western films like Hollywood or European or Middle East. The Indian camera shots using these angles are not only combined with semiotics but also capture cultural or traditional phenomenon. Especially 'cut away' shots like 'silhouettes' not only indicate emotional tangents but also act as 'sequence changers' which means carrying the story forward from one sequence to another sequence without letting out the in-built emotion between the sequences of scenes.

K. Viswanath's<sup>6</sup> films *SagaraSangamam* (1983), *Sankarabharanam* (1979), *SwarnaKalam* (1988), and *SruthiLayalu* (1987) have no parallels in the history of any other language-based cinema in India in so far their ability to combine classical arts such as dance and music to eliminate the caste distinction and artificial barriers that divided the Indian society in to a number of groups/sub-groups for over centuries (see Murthy, 2014 on K.Viswanath). Not only K.Viswanath but several of his contemporaries such as Bapu, Jandhayala and Vamsi have also combined the art forms such as classical music and dance with the narrative to usher in new ways of thinking for social change among varying economic groups. As mentioned earlier Telugu cinema has been perpetuating the modernist traditions of film productions while allowing transformations in its productions from modern to postmodern along the lines of multiple strands of the filmic genres (mythological, folk, social, socio-fantasy, socio-mythological fantasy, spy, and Western) for over eight decades. These pictures have

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6 K.Viswanath is an eminent director in Telugu though he has directed films in other languages including Hindi. He is known for his mastery in crafting the story with fine arts and to weave the story in such a way that it appeals to the audiences to overcome the narrow parochial tendencies such as caste and religion based discrimination in the Indian society. He was awarded the prestigious Dada Saheb Phalke award for his contribution to the Indian film industry in 2017.



been replete with more rituals, observances and conventions embedded with semiotics than in Hindi cinema (Murthy et al., 2015). With the world wide release of *Baahubali the Beginning* (2015) and *Baahubali, the Conclusion* (2017), directed by S.S.Rajamouli, the capabilities of Telugu cinema to produce folk films in combination with latest music and sound technology, besides visual effects, have become world known. In fact, the release of *Baahubali* 1 and 2 have changed the entire gamut of the Indian film production at one go (Murthy, 2018).

If the rose flower given by Akkineni Nageswara Rao, the hero in the film, to a young beautiful heroine, starred by Savitri was trodden over by her bullock cart in *Mooga Manasulu* (directed by Adurti Subba Rao) in 1960s, it is a semiotic shot implying the intervention of an invisible destiny (see Fig.5 the parting shots between Savitri and hero Nageswara Rao). In fact both Nageswara Rao, the boatman who regularly takes the heroine to the other shore across a holy river Godavari, and the heroine were in deep love for each other. But, the boatman was unable to divulge it to her as his economic position as a boatman forbids him to say it openly. Similarly Savitri also cannot divulge her love for the boatman. At this time her betrothal ceremony was fixed and the boatman was to see her off for the function. As a token of his admiration and affection for her, Nageswara Rao would present her a beautiful fresh rose but Savitri on her part having been filled with agony could not properly handle it. Nageswara Rao could see her gloominess writ large on her face but would fail to watch that the rose he had given her had fallen down. Even before he could recover from this agitating situation, the cart would move forward mutilating the rose he had given. This is a semiotic shot with philosophical overtones implying destiny of individuals as opposed to the latter choice.

Similarly one would see in *Baahubali, the beginning* (2015), a scar suddenly appears on the face of Rana when the latter got to know that Baahubali returned and had erected the idol of Rana with his monumental strength while people were applauding 'Baahubali', "Baahubali" all of a sudden. The scar is semiotic of Rana's displeasure of public applause of Baahubali's strength (see Rana's scarred face in Fig.5).

Telugu cinema is replete with millions of semiotic shots in every facet of life and even an ordinary illiterate citizen could easily deconstruct it. In keeping with the traditions of semiotics as metaphors, Vedantam Raghaviah produced *Devdas* film in Telugu/Tamil in 1953. Conducting a comparative study of Telugu remakes of *Devdas* with the remakes in Hindi (1955, 2002), the only film which was remade more than ten times in India, Murthy and Meitei (2016) had shown that Telugu/Tamil remakes were more semiotic in their frames of composition through the embedded bina-



ry oppositions. They were also of the view that Hindi *Devdas* shot by Bimal Roy also has a few binary oppositions but more metaphors. The general rule in the Indian philosophy and aesthetics is that more binary oppositions, the greater the philosophical depth. Less binary opposition in Bimal Roy's *Devdas* led to more metaphors, resulting in a less philosophical film/text (Murthy & Meitei, 2016, p. 35). Both Raghavaiah and Bimal Roy largely adopted the technique of 'dissolves' as an effect to indicate the time frames of recall, moving down the memory lane, from past to present and vice-versa which was an innovation from the Indian side in so far synchronizing story-line time with film-line time without mellowing down the emotional building in the frames.

#### 4. Conclusions

The present chapter not only overviews the existing scholarship on the Indian film studies from the perspectives of Bollywoodized academia but also exposes the pitfalls in their theorizations based on application of Western social and media theories. The study also has highlighted how cultural theory coupled with the Indian semiology and phenomenology has the ability to widely interpret the Indian cinema, including its regional cinema, the regional differences in culture notwithstanding.

The study showed from chosen case studies of films that there is tacit richness in the Indian life with family, temple, and colleges as three pillars on which several palatial houses of human life such as marriages, joint families, illnesses, births and deaths, etc., are carefully built. Every facet of life abounds in emotions and entanglement of relations which are shot with embedded semiotics that subsume binary oppositions and metaphors. These semiotics have the effect of enhancing spiritual and philosophical content in human emotions. The lesser the metaphors, the greater the philosophy.

The study also showed visuals drawn from various regional cinemas of India that depicts the inherent religious, spiritual and traditional semiotics and phenomenology. Films such as *MoogaManasulu* (1962) and *Baahubali* 1 & 2 (2015, 2017) have shown how semiotics has become inseparable and culturally rich entities of film making in classical Telugu cinema. The study has demonstrated how 'silhouettes' has been an important metaphor for various human expressions besides being an aesthetic form in film making and shooting of songs. Towards the end of achieving a number of semiotic and phenomenological expressions, the film directors in Telugu and Hindi have developed innovative camera shots and move-

ments which if related to the Euro-American cinema will not imply the same meanings. That being the significance of the Indian cinema, the latter could be understood only from a 'de-Westernized approach'.

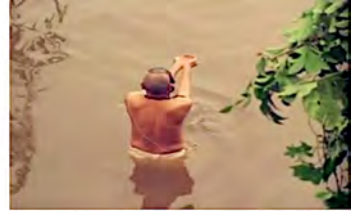
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Figure 1. Semiotic Shots in Religious and Philosophical Films



Nivedita in Bengali film *Bhagini Nivedita*(1961) and Shankara's Father, Shivaguru in the film *Adi Shankaracharya*(1983) offering morning prayers.



Nivedita in Bengali film *Bhagini Nivedita*(1961) and Shankara's mother, Aryamba in film *Adi Shankaracharya*(1983) offers prayers to the sacred *Tulsi*.



Shyam and his mother in Marathi film *Shyamchi Aai*(1953) and devotees at Sagar (Ocean) in Bengali film *Sagara Sangamey*(1958) praying at sea beaches.

Figure 2. Phenomenological symbols from films of humanistic, romantic and philosophical sub-themes



Characters from Marathi film *Shyamchi Aai*(1953), Hindi film *Do Ankhen Barah Haath*(1957) and Bengali film *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*(1968). Using Folk instruments for singing philosophical and social songs.



Characters from Marathi film *Shyamchi Aai*(1953), Bengali film *Bhagini Nivedita*(1961) and the *Adi Shankaracharya*(1983)—Phenomenological symbols - Eating on Plantain Leaves.



Scenes from Marathi film *Shyamchi Aai*(1953) and Hindi film *Teesri Kasam*(1969) - Cultural Aspect of Indian life – Singing while travelling in bullock carts.



Figure 3. Phenomenological scenes comprising song and dance sequences during Indian wedding occasions



Phenomenological Scenes of Singing and Dancing by women during Marriages: Scenes from *Chandni*(1989), *Darr*(1993), *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!* (1994)



Scenes from Bengali film *Ganadevata*(1978) and Hindi film *Darr*(1993). Common dress-White Saree Clad women while singing and dancing to the rhythm of music instruments of white dressed men.



Scene from *Ganadevata*(Bengali, 1978) and Hindi film *Darr*(1993).Men dancing and playing folk instruments during celebrations. Dancing and Singing in Pathos conveyed through Silhouettes (Below)



Figure 4. Phenomenological scenes capturing traditional ayurvedic treatment with leaves



Film: Tamil film *Samsaram Adhu Minsaram*(1986).



Phenomenological Scenes showing women adorning their tresses with garlands during dancing, singing and celebrations. Telugu film *Sankarabharanam*(1979), Hindi film *Darr*(1993), and Tamil film *Samsaram Adhu Minsaram*(1986) in order from left to right.



Innovation in Indian Cinematography: Silhouette shots used to express pathos in different postures. These shots are Semiotic in Telugu film *Meghasandesam*(1982), Malayalam film *Sree Narayana Guru* (1985) and Telugu film *Rudraveena*(1988).





Scenes from Hindi film *Aradhana*(1969), Telugu films *Meghasandesam*(1982) and *Rudraveena*(1988)

Clouds are used to express grief/*viraha*(pain due to separation).Use of silhouettes intensify the emotion in the Indian cinema frames.

Figure 5. a. Scar in the face (a semiotic shot) of Daggubati Rana in *Baahubali, the beginning* (2105).



a. Scarred face of Rana b. Silhouette shot beheading Rana's cousin by Baahubali.



c. Nageswara Rao, the boatman giving his love Savitri, seated in a bullock cart, a rose flower which would get trodden over by the bullock cart implying a different destiny -a semiotic shot—in the film *Mooga Manasulu*, 1964)